

S 3968

CONGRESSIONAL RECORD — SENATE

March 16, 1967

In speaking of certain unpleasant conditions in the New York commercial theater—as opposed to the “secure” theater that might be created by endowed continuity—I happened to mention the plight of some of our best performers. An actress, I said, might have an enormous and thoroughly deserved success. She might then have another, perhaps a third—though with a little time out between them to search for scripts and bargain with commercial packagers. Then, I continued, she might easily hit a dead stretch, through no particular fault of her own. The right play might not come along; it might not be possible to cast properly a play she liked; any sort of foul wind might stop her dead in her tracks. At the height of her powers, and with her freshness due to decline yearly as freshness so disloyally does, she might spend as much as five seasons out of work. The waste is incredible. Yet that’s the way the catch-as-catch-can commercial theater works, I concluded.

“But that’s exactly what can happen in our theater!” a charming woman from Central Europe exclaimed. I was puzzled. Weren’t the actors in her theater regularly employed? Yes, they were; once they’d graduated from the necessary preparatory school, and satisfactorily passed the tests imposed by the theatrical state board, they had jobs for life—or just about.

IN LIMBO

But my friend went on to explain. A girl out of school, a delightful ingénue, might join a company and work successfully, and frequently, for five or eight years. She would then be getting just a bit thready for ingénues, though not ample enough for character roles. She’d have arrived at a middle-ground “leading lady” position. Except that the company might already have an oversupply of “leading ladies,” firmly entrenched and determined to stay that way until their wigs and chokers gave out. They were permanent, too, and had priority. The result: the maturing ingénue might not work now for as much as ten years—until someone conveniently died or until she turned into a crane who could be cast in bits. She’d be paid all this time, true. But it wasn’t pay it was growth, we were talking about.

Another relatively young manager wanted out of state-subsidized repertory as fast as he could get out, though he had relatively few other places to go. He was fed up with the effects of security on his actors. They’d grown lazy, high-handed, reluctant to rehearse, and—what’s more to the point—extremely unwilling to tackle roles they hadn’t already established themselves in. They behaved both like stars and bureaucrats, he complained. They tended to stick to their bag of tricks; and they couldn’t be budged because they couldn’t be fired, they were office-holders.

Another kind of example. A director from behind an Iron Curtain country had, for a considerable time, been forced to do plays for the “workers,” which meant old-line agit-prop plays imported from Russia or at the very least, (very best, let’s say), Brecht. “Finally,” this director said, “I had to jump up and down and scream. I had to scream because the workers didn’t like the plays and wouldn’t come. I had to make the officials see that the actors became very discouraged playing to nobody.” It seems that in this particular case the dictum from above was relaxed; the director had just finished doing “Luv,” which the workers liked.

And there you are. Now none of this is to say that European municipal systems don’t have their virtues. They have many. The most interesting practice, to me, was one pursued in Sweden. In certain cities there playwrights do not give any one theater an exclusive right to a play; there is no bidding for rights, as there is, say, in Prague. The playwright simply publishes his play, which

means that it is now released to any management wishing to perform it. Six theaters may put it on simultaneously—and more or less as written. The author rarely bothers to go to rehearsals, though he may if he is asked. In due time he has six different opportunities to see his play differently done—and, obviously, his chances of getting a “right” production, and a success, out of so much independent activity are mightily increased. The future of his work isn’t staked on a single “all or nothing” throw. If I were a playwright, and didn’t need too much money, I’d move to Stockholm.

My purpose this morning, however, is neither to praise what is admirable nor fall back in mock astonishment at what is dismaying in the European methods we are striving so hard to copy. My purpose is to point out that credit and debts exist in any system, in all systems. Turn where you will, and dream as you may, the theater is going to grow thorns as well as rosebuds, and very often the thorns are going to be a necessary complement to the rosebuds. Good and ill come together, Helen of Troy must have had her flaws, anything we put hand to turns out to be a mixed blessing.

NO MAGIC WAND

The important thing is to know this, and not to imagine that heaven hovers somewhere just beyond a big enough endowment or near a greenroom in which all of the actors are knee-deep in social security. Such disappointment as we feel whenever a new crisis turns up in Philadelphia or New Haven is due to our having supposed that one last benevolent gesture would do the trick, that a sufficient supply of goodwill would corral perfection forever. We can’t imagine serpents in Eden because we are still innocents about the theater: we do expect the good, the true, and the beautiful to flow immediately and without embarrassing interruption from our having made such an effort and having had such good intentions. We’ve had noble thoughts; why can’t playwrights and playhouses, directors and prima donnas, live up to them?

I think that if we tighten our belts a bit against the possibility of not getting an instant full meal, if we agree to acknowledge the fact that every plan devised by mortal man breeds its own form of discontent, if we agree to junk the illusion that the wave of a magic wand will somewhere bring an altogether untroublesome, altogether uncorrupted kind of theater into existence, we’ll find ourselves in better shape to deal with the slings and arrows that do seem to impede progress.

When we learn to stop idealizing any one sort of practice, and begin to be tough-minded about the dirty tricks of fate we may expect everywhere, we will not be so discouraged by occasional bulletins from the front. Even when we get what we want, we’ll find it in some ways wanting. All right, so be it. Thus armed, we may get on with it. It is the realist, not the idealist, who is able to keep his spirits up.

PRESIDENT JOHNSON’S ADDRESS BEFORE THE TENNESSEE LEGISLATURE

Mr. BYRD of Virginia. Mr. President, the address yesterday by the President of the United States before the Tennessee Legislature is a significant one—and one that should be pondered carefully by the American people.

President Johnson marshaled the facts regarding Vietnam, and in language more forceful than ever before, he asserted the determination of the United States to achieve an honorable peace in southeast Asia.

The President made clear that—

We do not want permanent bases. We will begin withdrawal of our troops . . . whenever reciprocal concessions are forthcoming from our adversary.

With reference to the bombing of military targets in North Vietnam, he reported—

The firm belief of the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Central Intelligence Agency, and all the sources of information and advice at my command that the bombing is causing serious disruption and added expense to the North Vietnamese infiltration effort.

The President emphasized, too, what so many of his critics overlook:

The strength of Communist main force units in the south are clearly based on infiltration from the north.

Frequently on the floor of the Senate I have contended that so long as we have great masses of American military personnel in South Vietnam, our Government is obligated to give them full support by seeking the elimination of meaningful military targets in North Vietnam.

President Johnson put it this way in the most significant sentence of his significant speech:

It is simply unfair to American—and Vietnamese—soldiers to ask them to face increased enemy personnel and firepower without making an effort to reduce that infiltration.

That sentence, I feel, should be repeated again and again. The President’s words were simple ones, but vital ones.

I commend the President for the clarity in which he stated the case, and I concur in his assertion that it is unfair to our soldiers to ask them to face increased enemy action without making full effort to reduce enemy military capabilities.

I feel absolutely certain that no man in our Nation desires peace more than does the President. It is he who daily must make the agonizing decisions which mean life or death to so many Americans.

I commend the President, too, for his appointment of the distinguished diplomat, Mr. Ellsworth Bunker, as our Ambassador to the Government of South Vietnam. Ambassador Bunker through the years has rendered able and devoted service, and the experience he has acquired on five continents should mean much to our Nation as he faces the difficult assignment at Saigon.

I ask unanimous consent to have printed in the Record the text of the President’s address delivered yesterday at Nashville, Tenn.

There being no objection, the address was ordered to be printed in the Record, as follows:

PRESIDENT’S REMARKS TO TENNESSEE LEGISLATURE

Following is a text of President Johnson’s prepared remarks before a joint session of the Tennessee Legislature:

It is always a special pleasure for me to visit Tennessee.

For a Texan, it is like a homecoming. Much of the courage and hard work that went into the building of the Southwest came from the hills and fields of Tennessee. It strengthened the sinews of thousands of men—at the Alamo, at San Jacinto and in the homes of a pioneer people.